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ABSTRACT

The goal behind a televised correspondence class in theatre is to expose students to the fact that variety is a magic factor in theater. In the three-unit course, students watch televised videotapes; read the plays, textbook, and teacher-developed study guide; and mail in their completed assignments. The first videotape, "Miss Julie," shows a rehearsal in progress, demonstrating the intricate interplay involved in preparing a production. One study guide assignment is to write a subtext--the character's inner thoughts for a specific page of dialogue. The second play in the course is Ibsen's "Peer Gynt," which focuses on the input of designers, including costume and music design. The second unit of the course focuses on a realism versus surrealism theme, using plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg. The third unit of the class is centered on tragic heroes: Oedipus, Macbeth, Woyzeck, and Saint Joan of Arc. To ensure that the course is one in theatre and not an English department drama course, students should be involved in the decision-making process of any theatrical production, exposed to potential variations within a script, and encouraged to develop their critical faculties. (HTH)

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Can Theatre (Not Drama) Be Taught Over Television? Constructing A Course To Encourage That Possibility

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"Variety is the spice of life," according to some roving philanderers. Equally it is the spice of theatre. To give a sense of the complexity and variety that make up the world of theatre is always difficult, but more so in a televised correspondence class where the instructor has no direct contact with students. The instructor cannot answer questions, encourage debate, foster imagination or counteract false preconceptions. The other major difficulty in teaching a televised class is to make sure that the class is a "theatre" class as opposed to an English Department "drama" class. The students do not work on crews, or act or participate directly in the production process. Instead they read plays which too easily can make the focus of the class seem to be literature as opposed to theatre. The one advantage to the class I teach by correspondence is that the students do view actual videotapes of BBC productions of plays. Even that advantage can work against one of the basic fundamentals of theatre: the potential for variety inherent in any script. In watching one videotape of one director's vision of a script students easily can be lead to believe that this is the definitive way to do that script. They can even end up disliking a play or a playwright simply because they didn't like that particular production. As a result my main goal in creating a study guide to accompany the videotapes was to expose students to the fact that variety is a magic factor in theatre. I do not want students in viewing a BBC production of a section of Oedipus Rex to believe that this is the only way to do Oedipus. I do want them to be aware of the complex collaborative effort involved in any production, even a bad one. The beginning student must learn that each production depends on director, actors, designers, even publicity people collaborating in a complex way to arrive at a unified art form.

The class I teach is set up as a three-unit undergraduate correspondence course: an introduction to theatre for students with some, slight, or no actual production experience. Students watch televised videotapes, read the textbook, the study guide, the plays and mail in their completed assignments. In teaching the class I was limited initially by the choice of plays to be read and viewed. Thelma Altshuler and Paula Milton, creators of the course and the textbook (Drama: Play, Performance, Perception), had already made that decision. Also I was limited by what that text and the accompanying videotapes chose to stress. My only means of adding to the course was through the study guide. Next year there will be an additional way of aiming the course even more towards theatre as opposed to drama. A series of sections from plays

will be recorded to illustrate specific theatrical points. First I would like to examine the BBC videotape I found most successful in highlighting plays as theatre and then outline my plans for creating future sound recordings.

The most successful videotape (not in terms of best performances or best direction (Sizwe Bansi Is Dead with the original cast gets my vote for that) but in terms of differentiating theatre from drama is the Miss Julie. The Miss Julie videotape shows a rehearsal in progress. The director gives notes, scenes are discussed, worked and reworked: showing how lines can differ in meaning depending on how they are delivered; showing how a director's interpretation can mold an actor's characterization; showing how the addition of wigs and costumes can transform a rehearsal in progress into a more finished product. This videotape allows students to see the intricate interplay involved in a production in process. It also introduces the actor's use of subtext. To complement the focus on subtext in the videotape one of the first exercises in the study guide requires the student to write out subtext for either Jean or Julie for a specific page of dialogue in the script. This exercise makes the student aware of the process by which an actor can fill out his own characterization by actually writing out the character's inner thoughts. The student learns that these thoughts may in fact contradict and flavor what the character is actually saying. Just as in real life you continue thinking when another person is speaking to you, the student learns that an actor must be involved in the play and reacting to the other characters even when he is silent. The student can then begin to recognize the complexity of the actor's task. The actor must create a rounded characterization and remain continually involved in the play. The actor must avoid amateurish characterization in which he says his line and then simply stands there waiting for his next cue.

A student watching a videotape of Miss Julie and doing the exercise in the study guide has become at least briefly acquainted with the rehearsal process and with the use of subtext, subjects seldom touched on in a literature class. Something further that might have been added to this videotape of Miss Julie, to make students equally aware of the complexity of the director's job, would be to have two directors rehearse the same actors in the same scene. In seeing this experiment the students would become aware of the input a director can have in shaping the same play and the same actors in very different fashions and producing sometimes wildly different results. The student would learn that some directors, like Meyerhold, exert dictatorial control,

and demonstrate precise line readings and gestures, while some like Stanislavsky allow actors more freedom, nudging the characterizations to emerge from out of the experiences and memories of individual actors. A Meyerhold cuts and arranges every author's script to suit his own production concept; a Copeau insists that theatre is a religion and the author's script is sacred, not to be tampered with or distorted.

The second play in the course to be seen and read is Ibsen's Peer Gynt. This imaginative drama gives the students a chance to focus on the input of designers as well as actors and directors. Study guide photographs of actual productions of Peer Gynt vividly illustrate what divergent design approaches to Peer Gynt have been adopted. The students are asked to consider how they would dress the Button Molder, the Troll King, the Strange Passenger; they even send in an actual costume design so that the instructor knows their imagination as well as their brains are at work. Similarly on the planned recording the actors will be asked to play a fantasy scene from Peer Gynt (after all even Ibsen asked,"Can one put a man on the stage running around with a casting-ladle?"). Let the students hear actors experimenting with portrayals of such fantasy characters. Have them read aloud the threadballs, the withered leaves, the broken straws, the dewdrops (using differing rhythms and pitches to see which readings best capture the natural qualities of the various objects). The recording might even use Grieg's music for the play to see if the students feel that this music successfully establishes or adds to the play's atmosphere; then choose another piece of music, something punk rock, so students learn how the chosen soundtrack strongly affects the resulting production. I am not saying ignore all criticism written on the play; maybe even mention various critical approaches: the belief that the play takes place in Peer's mind. But rather than saying the play does for certain take place in his mind, let the idea bounce off the student's own imagination so he can arrive at his own fantasy production.

Now we have one unit of the course completed. In the first two plays we have briefly covered much of the "process" involved in an actual production. In the next unit we focus on three specific playwrights and a realism versus surrealism theme. The contrasting realisms of Ibsen and Chekhov and the surrealism and expressionism of late Strindberg. Certainly the BBC videotapes give us a sense of this but they could show more clearly the variety within each play as opposed to attempting to neatly catagorize the authors. I set myself two major goals with the Ibsen-Chekhov-Strindberg triumvirate. One is to contrast the realistic styles of Ibsen and Chekhov. The second is to

show the playable realism within Strindberg's surrealistic The Ghost Sonata.

A way to contrast Ibsen's realism and Chekhov's realism is to look at the endings of the two plays being considered: The Wild Duck and The Three Sisters. The Drama: Play, Performance, Perception text stresses that Ibsen writes well-made plays with careful foreshadowing leading to highly theatrical climaxes, while Chekhov writes more seemingly plotless structures. In his plays Chekhov creates characters who speak not in logical progression but characters who speak more like real people talk, jumping from subject to subject, frequently not even listening to one another and interjecting seemingly irrelevant comments. The study guide points out these differences by focusing on the ends of the two plays. Ibsen's play culminates in a great climax, Hedwig's death. She is carried out on stage so we can see her lying in death after the dramatic offstage gunshot. In contrast The Three Sisters has the gunshot and death of the Baron take place entirely offstage. Not his death but the reaction of others characters to his death is the focus of the action. Also at the end of The Three Sisters we do not hear a grave discussion of life and life-lies; we hear an interesting, slightly comic, contrapuntal conversation. While the three sisters (a la Ibsen) gravely and joyously ponder the meaning of life, the doctor casually sings an ironic little ditty to himself almost as if no dramatic event had ever taken place. A recording of these two endings will reveal something about the variety available within the term realism. Chekhov is more interested in observing his characters methods of dealing with events rather than focusing on the theatricality of the event itself. Record the two endings, so students can hear as well as read the differences.

Variation in production approach can be pointed out by doing two recordings of the end of The Three Sisters. One can be done as the post-revolutionary Russian directors often interpreted it: stirring military music in the background, the doctor's lines entirely cut, as the three sisters look forward triumphantly to a new future under communism. The second recording can stress the juxtaposition of life and death, survival in the midst of decay that is suggested in the play as written. In fact as originally written this theme received even further emphasis. The play ended with the sight of the Baron's body being carried across the upstage area while the doctor ironically sang and the sisters contemplated their futures. This ending gives no easy answers to the puzzle that is life.

Another point I would like to examine in the Ibsen-Chekhov-Strindberg section is the problems in production presented by a surrealistic script, The Ghost Sonata. Many students will read The Ghost Sonata and see it as a bizarre fantasy with nothing to do with reality. Certainly there is a dreamlike quality to it but live actors must play actions and intentions within that dream to make the characters and the script come to life. Many critiques have been written as to what the play means. Strindberg himself said, "I hardly knew myself what I had written." One scholar sees the show as having a musical structure with the Student and Hummel being the lively allegro section; the older people being the largo section (slow with long pauses); and the Student and the Young Lady being a quiet andante. Another theory is that the play represents a symbolic journey from outer to inner life; from the superficial life of the street to the drawing-room where the inner lives and illusions of characters begin to be revealed to the hyacinth room where the Student himself lives out his own inner life coming face to face with death in the onstage picture of Boeklin's The Isle of the Dead (with music emerging enticingly from the picture to symbolize the final step on man's inner journey). For a director these might prove helpful theories but let us record the actors playing the third movement (the Student and the Young Lady) and simply give them the information in these two theories. Judging from the BBC production the product will be rather lifeless and boring. Then let's take a more action-oriented theory. The third movement is a depiction of the evolution of love from the first romantic sigh to tiresome familiarity to disillusionment and death. Point out to the actors parts of the progression: the housewifely bickering of the Young Lady's comments after she begins to tire of the Student's attentions.

> To sweep after her, to dust after her, to light the fire in the stove . . . to see to the damper, to wipe the glasses, to lay the table over again . .. to remake the bed.

Let the actors play the scene again with the realistic action-oriented input. Such an exercise will illustrate for students that the director must find the reality within the characters in order to hold audience interest long enough to make an accompanying symbolic point. When the student realizes this fact, he may be more apt to see the theatrical potential within a play he might otherwise view as theatrically impossible.

The third unit of the class is centered on tragic heroes: Oedipus, Macbeth, Woyzeck, Saint Joan. In the videotapes students can see the variations and similarities in tragic heroes, but they are not made aware of

the variations introduced by such factors as translation, production history, lack of scholarly knowledge. For Oedipus let us record one brief section of the play twice, using two different translations. The student then becomes aware of another aspect of theatre: the choice of translation can heighten theatricality or work against it. With Macbeth let the student be aware that after the play returned to the stage in the late seventeenth century that it first was played as an opera. Even after the actor Garrick returned to Shakespeare's basic text the play continued to be altered and cut according to director and actor whim. Garrick himself doubled the length of Macbeth's death speech; it sounds corny to us today but at the time he won much applause with his alteration. At some points in time the order of Macbeth's scenes was rearranged so that all those scenes occuring in the same setting could play consecutively. Why? To allow producers to use the magnificent new painted scenery, while cutting down on the amount of time needed for elaborate scene shifts In the twentieth century there have been modern dress Macbeths, nude with Macbeths, voodoo Macbeths. However, let us not simply have the student read these facts, let us point it out to him more vividly. Take a scene among the three witches. Do one recording with the witches played by men as was done in Shakespeare's time. Have the same men again read the witches but add a comic touch since that was how the witches were played in the 1700s. Then have women read the witches twice: once stressing the supernatural scary element with accompanying spooky music and once done more realistically with the three witches being some old crones ransacking the corpses of soldiers who died in the recent battle. Make the variety of Macbeth's stage history live for the students so they will learn that throughout time, directors, actors, and designers have tampered with plays and sometimes the results have been magnificent and sometimes foolhardy.

Another theatrical subject that could be focused on with Oedipus and Macbeth is how the playwright himself makes theatrical choices affecting the resulting production. Jarry's Ubu Roi is also covered in the course. Have two actors read the section at the beginning of Ubu where Jarry parodies Lady Macbeth encouraging Macbeth to kill the King and usurp power; then have the same two actors read the original scene from Macbeth. These readings will illustrate how the similar plot can call for entirely different acting styles depending on the intention of the playwright. Also let us point out that our great tragic hero of all time (according to Aristotle) is Oedipus. Oedipus's tragic flaw throughout the play is his rash temper. In his initial rage upon discovering the truth of his birth, Oedipus rushes off the stage to kill his wife-mother Jocasta. He is only stopped from completing this grisly act of violence by the fact that the playwright has arranged for

Oedipus to find Jocasta already dead, killed by her own hand. If Sophocles had allowed Oedipus to kill Jocasta the audience's sympathy for the tragic hero would have been diluted. Try a recording of the play in which Oedipus announces he has killed Jocasta to show the effect a theatrical decision made by a playwright can warp or ennoble our perception of a character. It is not that Oedipus was not capable of killing his wife-mother; it is simply that the clever Sophocles arranged the plot so that Oedipus is prevented from committing the bloodthirsty act.

A theatrical device introduced in Oedipus that also received short shrift in the BBC production was the Greek chorus. Since I am planning purely a sound recording I cannot totally counter this lack of emphasis. The BBC videotape gives the audience one rather balletic chorus of males that might encourage students to think that this is the way the Greek choruses performed in their own time. A videotape showing two variations of choruses would open students' minds to the fact that scholars have only a tentative and rather vague conception of what the Greeks actually directed their choruses to do. How did they dance? How did they sing? Did they ever split lines so not everyone was speaking in unison? Since another tragic hero studied in the course is Woyzeck, the chorus theme reoccurs in the commentator function of the barker in Woyzeck. Again an opportunity presents itself to focus on variety: contrasting conceptions of the ancient Greek chorus with a more contemporary chorus. Again we have an opportunity to make students aware of the variety within the world of theatre and of the theatrical devices that are carried on from generation to generation and adjusted and modified to fit current tastes, beliefs and methods.

I could go on forever with suggestions for making the course more theatre oriented. Involve students in the process of decisions occuring in any theatrical production. Don't simply show them one production so they may falsely assumes "this is the way you always do Oedipus, or Macbeth or Peer Gynt." Expose them to the potential variations within a script. Develop their critical faculties so they don't like a production because they are told to or because everyone else likes it. To appreciate theatre most fully a student must be aware of the complexity of the process, a point made in the Miss Julie videotape but then too quickly disregarded. Let the students hear or see an actor playing a tragic death scene and a comic death scene so they can become aware of differences in acting technique in playing tragedy and comedy. Let them hear a trained actor reading Restoration lines and an untrained

actor groping his way through a Restoration speech emphasizing every other word and thus losing the entire train of thought, not to mention the ease of the upper class style of delivery. Rack your brain for ways to illustrate how "theatre" is different from "drama" if you are placed in the position of teaching students who are taking (that contradiction of all contradictions) a correspondence course in theatre.